

# Oh, Solo ... Me? ... Oh!

*by Bob Bailey*

Last week I received an e-mail from a friend who wanted an instructor's perspective on solo diving. He asked "How do I determine if I'm ready for solo diving"? It's a good question, but difficult to answer ... especially for an instructor representing a training agency that mandates diving with a buddy. But I gave it some thought, and I'd like to use this column to share some of those thoughts with you.

All of us were trained to dive with a buddy. Virtually all of the training agencies hold to the premise that it's just safer, and therefore something we should do. And because diving is mostly a social activity, it's usually more fun to dive with someone you can share your underwater experiences with. But more and more people are looking at going solo as an alternative approach to diving. For some it holds a particular attraction ... either for specific activities like spear fishing or photography, or simply because it allows a degree of freedom that one cannot attain by diving with a buddy. Whatever the reasons, the decision to dive solo should not be made lightly. As with my friend, you should ask yourself whether you're ready. And you should carefully consider the risks, skills, training, and equipment you would need to go it alone.

## ***Why Solo?***

The logical first step would be to ask yourself why you want to dive solo. Perhaps it's because you've had a bad experience with a buddy, or you are having trouble finding dive buddies. Is solo diving really the right response to that issue? Or perhaps you have a schedule that makes it difficult to find dive buddies when you're available to dive. Whatever the reason, it's important to assess whether or not solo diving is really the right approach.

## ***Am I Ready?***

Solo diving is very much about making an honest assessment of both your skills and your mental strengths and weaknesses.

- Can you function with your mask off or flooded?
- Can you doff and don your BCD underwater?
- Can you recognize the onset of stress, or the beginnings of a panic cycle, and take steps to stay in control of yourself?
- Would you know what to do if you were bent or injured and alone?

When you're solo diving, you won't have another diver to help you out of any difficult or unexpected situations, so you need to plan accordingly and be able to respond to any emergency in a calm and rational manner. The mantra Stop, Breathe, Think, and Act is far more important when solo than when you're diving with a buddy. You have to be able to anticipate the risks, be extra vigilant to avoid them, and be methodical to resolve the ones you can't avoid.

## ***What Skills Do I Need?***

First and foremost, you need to be very comfortable with your basic diving skills ... you should have good buoyancy control, be able to function with a flooded (or lost) mask, and be able to recover a lost regulator.

Dive planning becomes crucial. Pre-dive preparations need to be made with more emphasis on risk-avoidance. During the dive, it is crucial to maintain an awareness of where you are, and stick to your dive plan. After the dive, guess what? You're still alone. Make sure you've thought through how to safely end the dive and exit the water. This is particularly important if you're diving from a boat or in surf because there isn't anyone available to help you.

Good gas management skills are essential. Never plan on your redundant air source as part of your gas supply ... it's there strictly for emergencies. You also need to account for the fact that it may take you longer to solve a problem than it would with a buddy, and plan your gas reserves accordingly.

You should be able to comfortably remove and replace your gear underwater ... because in the event of an entanglement there won't be anyone around to help you. And finally, you should be comfortable with your ability to do a controlled emergency swimming ascent (CESA). Because if all else fails, you may have to abandon your rig and swim for the surface.

## ***How Much Redundancy Is Enough?***

The primary logic behind diving with a buddy is so that if some piece of equipment fails, you have your dive buddy there to assist you. Dive buddies provide each other with redundancy ... if a piece of equipment fails you can still end the dive safely. When solo diving, you have to bring your redundancy with you. At a minimum, this means a completely independent source of air ... such as double cylinders or a pony bottle. A second cutting device is also something you should take with you. EMT shears are highly recommended in addition to a standard dive knife. At least one of your cutting devices should be attached to a lanyard, so that if necessary you can attach it to your wrist to avoid accidentally dropping it. Another important consideration is a spare mask, so that you do not lose your sight if something happens to the one you're wearing. Less fundamental, but also important will be some sort of signaling device, such as a deployable surface marker buoy and a reel or spool, as well as a Dive Alert or other audible device. Of course, you should be proficient in the proper use of all of your gear.

And remember that redundant gear doesn't include the extra brain of a dive buddy. You need to always keep your mind focused and alert.

## ***OK, So Am I Good To Go?***

As with any aspect of diving, proper training is important. At least one agency currently offers a solo diving class for recreational divers. It may also be possible to get training through the judicious choice of a diving mentor ... someone who has the experience and is willing to work with you to assure that you have the requisite skills to dive solo.

And there are some “Rules of Thumb” that can be applied to solo diving:

- Distribute your weights in such a way that both you and your rig can be independent of each other. In other words, if using an integrated BCD, consider putting some of your weights in a harness or weight belt that you wear. Remember, if you have to remove the BCD underwater you want to be able to maintain control of both yourself and your doffed rig without one sinking while the other tries to rocket to the surface.
- Manage stress and anxiety by maintaining an awareness of your pulse and breathing rate. Be on the alert for signs of narcosis or any other condition that would lead to distorted thinking. And adopt stricter criteria for when it’s time to consider aborting the dive.
- Dive at sites you are familiar with. Avoid sites with known entanglement hazards, currents, or other risks that may become unmanageable without help.
- Always let someone know where you will be diving, when you expect to be done, and what to do if you are overdue. It’s always a good idea to contact that person as soon as you have safely exited the water.

And finally, recognize that there are quite a few things that no amount of gear will help you with, such as injuries or medical problems. So put some thought into what you would do in an emergency. And finally, use good judgment to conduct your dive in a way that minimizes risks. In other words, a solo dive isn’t a good time to try pushing personal limits or trying out new gear for the first time.